

MY LIFE WITH EWA
THE EARLY YEARS

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Preface

What follows here is just as the title implies: an account of the early years of my life with my wife. The primary impetus for the project was provided by our son, Andrew. Having endured yet another retelling of our abridged response to the “How did you two meet?” question posed by some new acquaintances, he challenged me to write the story. Invariably, the answer to that specific question is summarized with a half dozen sentences, which encompass a four-year time period. With apologies to the late Paul Harvey, you are about to share in “the rest of the story.” It has been a labor of love.

The inspiration for this effort has been the title character. She is one of a kind. I fear my words will fail to accurately describe that which makes her unique. Perhaps those who know her will share some of my observations.

I have released endorphins aplenty while revisiting old photo albums. I have learned much in the course of checking facts against my own recollections. I have watched less television. I have a sense of accomplishment at having completed what I started. Above all, I have, once again, affirmed that I am so very blessed to be married to my wife.

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For Andrew and Maya

Chapter 1: I'm Going Where?

It was May of 1975. Maybe you remember what it was like. The US was evacuating its embassy in Saigon. Streaking had come and gone. The stock market was just beginning to recover from an extended downturn. Gerald Ford was our president. Most people had yet to hear of Bruce Jenner. Jack Nicholson and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had just cleaned up at the Oscars. Nixon administration personnel were being sentenced to prison for their roles in Watergate. We were soon to reach two hundred years as a nation. The Cold War was going strong, but the “ping-pong diplomacy” of 1972 in China had initiated a thaw of sorts, even with the Soviet bloc. Eighteen was the legal age for drinking in many states. Simon and Garfunkel, Elton John, and the Eagles were among my personal favorites. The Pittsburgh Steelers had won their first Super Bowl in January. And I was driving a school bus twice a day to pay for tuition expenses at Grand View College before transferring to the University of Northern Iowa.

“You gotta be kidding me,” I said to no one in particular as I pulled the bus on to the shoulder, in response to the flashing red lights that were clearly intended for me. I was usually the first driver to depart every afternoon from the Norwoodville Elementary School parking lot because my route covered the greatest distance. As the rookie driver I didn’t select my route; it was assigned to me. I stood up to tell my kindergarten passengers to remain in their seats while I went back to the car with the flashing lights to talk with “Mr. Policeman.”

Little Rollie Kouski asked, “Are you mad? My daddy always gets mad when he talks to the policeman.”

I had to watch as every other driver slowed his bus to make certain he could believe what he was seeing. That’s right, one of their very own was being cited for speeding—while driving a school bus full of kindergartners—less than three blocks from the school! Between their

wild hand gestures and guffaws I was confident they would be waiting en masse at the bus barn once I finished the route. They were.

“Son, I’ve been sitting here in this same spot, every day, for two weeks. I’ve been watching all of you drivers barrel down Broadway. I know it is downhill, and I know the limit changes from twenty-five to forty-five just up the street. But right here it is only twenty-five. Every one of you drivers has been over the limit. I just decided that today I was going to send a message to all of you. You just happened to be the first one out of the chute, so I am citing you for speeding. Sorry, you were the one to be the example. Now maybe all of you will slow down.”

And that is why I married a girl from Bydgoszcz, Poland.

I suppose that segue merits some explanation. My father always liked music. He was not a trained musician but he had a pleasant bass voice. He liked to sing and was in the church choir. But even when the choir wasn’t singing, Dad always sang the hymns with a little more gusto than the rest of the congregation. And he would harmonize. That always fascinated me, too. You know how sometimes people sing really loud—like they are trying to impress you? Well, that wasn’t Dad. If he had been like that I probably wouldn’t have liked music. He just enjoyed singing, and still does. I wasn’t particularly gifted in music, like my little sister was, but I was probably a little better than my older brother.

Dad found an outlet for his singing interests. He joined the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America Inc., or SPEBSQSA, for short. I was probably seven or eight years old when Mom and Dad took us to our first “Barbershop Show” at KRNT Theatre. I liked it. The music was OK, I guess, but I really liked those funny guys, “The Four Nubbins.” (The featured quartet).

And that is why I married a girl from Bydgoszcz, Poland.

My youth was a pretty typical middle-America, 1960s, blue collar experience. We were probably closer to poor than to rich, but we were far from either one. Dad was a truck driver who had grown up with six siblings. Mom was a nurse and had been raised on a farm along with three sisters and a brother. We weren't exactly the Cleavers because Dad didn't wear a suit to work and Mom always worked outside the home to make ends meet. But Mom and Dad did teach some of the same values as Ward and June. My brother took care of me, kind of like Wally took care of The Beav. My father liked to reference my two best friends as Gilbert and Whitey. He even pegged another buddy as Eddie Haskell.

As I passed through adolescence, like most young men, I progressed from total insecurity to false confidence, to small bouts of genuine confidence. I had some great male role models. My dad and a couple of teachers and coaches let me know it was okay to pursue interests which may be out of the mainstream. I actually did a few things in school because I wondered if I would enjoy them, not because they were "the" things to do. I loved sports, but then, who didn't? I played football, baseball, and basketball, and I lifted weights. I'm not saying I was particularly good at any of those endeavors, but most guys did those things. No, I'm talking about learning to play chess... or bridge. I was the lead in a one act play that made it to state finals competition. I tried out for, and made, swing choir. I signed up for creative writing class. I was "Harry the Horse" in *Guys and Dolls*. I learned how to ballroom dance (I discovered girls love to dance and guys don't), and I became the youngest member of the DeMoinaires Barbershop Chorus.

I thought it was kind of cool to hang out with older guys every Monday night singing four-part a cappella harmony. To many it may sound weird to be seventeen or eighteen years old and be singing barbershop music with your dad and one of your uncles, but I enjoyed it. Besides, some of the guys would go for a beer after practice on Mondays. My dad didn't go. He didn't drink and the 6:00 AM start to his shift came too quickly. I had been doing this for a couple of years when

the chorus was invited to be a part of some people-to-people diplomacy to Eastern Europe.

Like jazz, barbershop harmony is uniquely American. Some fellow named Owen Cash is credited with starting SPEBSQSA back in the 1930s. The story goes that the acronym was a spoof on the alphabet soup of acronyms resulting from FDR's New Deal programs of the Great Depression. SPEBSQSA changed its name a few years ago to the Barbershop Harmony Society and moved its national headquarters from Kenosha, Wisconsin, to Nashville, Tennessee. The DeMoinaires also changed their name to The Pride of Iowa Barbershop Chorus, but I digress.

Enculturation was a quasi government entity which had been established to promote people-to-people exchanges to countries which had generally been closed to Americans since the end of World War II. Someone had the great idea that if we were to send various slices of Americana to those faraway places, we could further melt the elements of the Cold War and make the world a safer place. So it was, when a representative of *Enculturation* came to the DeMoinaires to present an offer for our little barbershop chorus to travel to Poland for sixteen days in August/September of 1975.

The cost of the entire trip would be about seven hundred dollars per person, because much of it was being subsidized by the US and Polish governments, or at least that's how I remember things. The fact that Dad didn't have the vacation time only meant he didn't have to do the math to determine if he had the money. To me, seven hundred dollars may as well have been seven million. What little I knew of Poland generally began with, "How many Polacks does it take to...?" and that it was a communist country.

These challenges, combined with the fact that I was planning to be in Cedar Falls, Iowa, for the first week of my junior year of college before the chorus was scheduled to return, caused me to politely decline my

Uncle Vern's gracious offer to lend me the money for the trip. I had even made arrangements with the Cedar Falls Public Schools to drive a school bus while attending classes at the university, provided I came to school a week ahead of time for their bus driver orientation. The opportunity to take my first airplane ride was tempting, but I told Uncle Vern there was just no way.

So, there you have it. I was a middle class kid, living at home, finishing his sophomore year at the local junior college, enjoying barbershop as a hobby, and driving a school bus to earn money for the next year's tuition at the four year school. I had turned down the offer of a trip to some place behind the Iron Curtain because of insufficient funds and a requirement to be in Cedar Falls a week before classes were to start. Then some frustrated Polk County Deputy, who probably needed to make his quota, decided to interfere with my karma, touch me with that fickle finger of fate, and play havoc with my destiny. He held up that radar gun, pulled the trigger, and changed my world. Gosh, I wish I could remember his name so I could thank him.

As I told you earlier, my route was the longest one. Generally, most of the drivers were gone by the time I returned to the barn. Not this night, though. They were all there. Each of them fancied himself a real Don Rickles or Alan King.

"So, Parnelli Jones, which gear were you in when he slapped the gun on you?"

"If I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn't have believed it."

"Are you sure Allen Funt wasn't somewhere and you were on Candid Camera?"

I took it all in stride, but I was concerned about whether or not the school district would let me continue driving the bus for the last three to four weeks of the school year. Fortunately, my traffic court date wasn't

until early June. School was out before I was officially found guilty of doing thirty-seven in a twenty-five mile per hour zone.

I would guess it was about four weeks before I got the letter. When I saw the Cedar Falls School District logo on the envelope, I was pretty certain I knew what it was.

Dear Mr. Pratt,

During a routine search of your driving record it was determined you have recently been found guilty of a moving violation for speeding. The safety of our students is our first priority and district policy requires us to rescind our offer of employment to you for the upcoming school year.... Blah, blah, blah.

Did I mention my girlfriend for most of the previous three years had recently told me I wasn't Mr. Right? A good portion of that summer was spent drowning my sorrows with my buddy Scott (aka Gilbert), he too having been discarded by his first love. Scott's mother admonished us for feeling sorry for ourselves. She sought to shame us out of our depression by delivering what I consider to be the most memorable put down of my life.

"You guys are pathetic. Look at yourselves. Here you are, two twenty year olds... you are at the height of your sexual capacity. You have all that lead in your pencils and no one to write to. I repeat myself, you are pathetic." Shirlee was one of a kind. I still smile every time I think of her.

It just so happened I received the reject letter from the school district on a Monday as I was about to head off to barbershop chorus practice. By now everyone in our extended family had heard the story of how Tim had been stopped for speeding while driving a school bus filled with five-year-olds. Most were confident I would not be driving a school bus in the near future, so it was no shock to my Uncle Vern when I confirmed this suspicion at chorus rehearsal.

The chorus was working on Bobby Vinton's *Melody of Love*. (Bobby Vinton is Polish and at times has been referenced as the Polish Prince). They were learning one of the verses in Polish to impress their hosts when they went to Poland.

"*O moja droga ja cie kocham*, means that I love you so. *Moja droga ja cie kocham*, more than you'll ever know..." It was a catchy little tune. "So, that's what Polish sounds like," I thought.

Then Uncle Vern repeated his offer to lend me the money if I wanted to go to Poland. All of a sudden it hit me. Why not? Clearly the bus driving gods didn't want me to drive a bus. Cupid had seen fit to direct his arrow away from me. I had a chance to visit a communist country. I had never been on a plane, and my uncle was making me an offer that was hard to refuse. I decided to accept Uncle Vern's offer. I was going to Poland.

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